

## Nature in Other Cultures

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Should we care about how nature is thought of in other cultures? Yes, and for several reasons. To begin with, it is important to recognize that while we share the earth, ocean waters, and atmosphere with the rest of humanity, and while societies around the globe must cooperate in order to effectively respond to the dangers and even existential threat of climate change, our different cultures have conditioned us to experience natural phenomena and to understand the relation between humans and (the rest of) nature in different ways. Our artistic, scientific, philosophical, and religious traditions shape the ways in which we conceive of and perceive nature.

Think of the various views of nature that compete with one another even *within* Western culture. Are artificial human activities disrupting the harmonious ecologies of nature that romantic poets have eulogized and environmental activists are fighting to restore? Or, has the natural world been given to human beings to dominate and domesticate, to take care of until the time comes when its apocalyptic destruction will herald the eternal salvation or damnation of our supernatural souls? Or, does anything and everything happen according to scientific laws of nature, such that the Fukushima nuclear disaster is just as much a natural phenomenon as are our attempts to clean up after it? For the last few centuries, such Western views have spread around the globe in the process of the cultural hegemony endemic to past colonization and present globalization. Still, a wide range of alternative views of nature continues to exist in the various regions around the globe today, views that have deep and resilient cultural roots.

The first, pragmatic reason we should care about alternative views of nature is that if we want to effectively work with other peoples on shared problems concerning our shared natural environment—and surely we must—then we have to try and understand the terms in which and the values with which those other peoples are approaching the issues. In other words, in order to

cooperate with others in addressing issues of climate change and other shared problems regarding our natural environment, we need to be able to understand their points of view as well as be able to explain our own.

There are ethical as well as pragmatic reasons for caring about what others think of nature. Not only is there the obvious ethical duty to save and improve lives by effectively addressing environmental problems, it is also ethically imperative to try and understand how other people think so that we can fully treat them—to borrow Kant’s phrase—as ends in themselves and not merely as means to achieve our own goals.

Consider the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” A version of this basic principle of morality can be found in many traditions. Yet one question has always bothered me concerning the Golden Rule: How do I know that others don’t desire different things than I do? Why should I assume that they want to be treated the same way that I want to be treated? And so, Confucius’s “negative” formulation of the Golden Rule strikes me as more prudent and preferable. In response to the question, “Is there one teaching that can serve as a guide for one’s entire life?” Confucius responded, “Is it not ‘sympathetic understanding’ (*shu*)? Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire” (trans. Slingerland). For example, I’m not sure if someone from another culture would want me to cut down their forest and build a shopping mall, like many in my culture have preferred and presumed to do, but I am rather certain that they would not want me to replace their forest with a toxic waste dump. Before we rush in and try to change other people’s lives, operating under the presumption that they want the same things that we do, we would do well to ask, and to listen carefully to what they say. We might even learn something.

This brings us to a third reason why we should care what people from other cultures think about nature and our relation to it. We might learn something from them, not just about how *they do* think, but also about how *we should* think about these matters.

Consider the environmentally destructive effects of modern Western consumer capitalism, together with strip mining, factory farming, and other such practices that have been spread to—sometimes more or less imposed upon—other lands, often in the name of bringing them the same quality of life that we enjoy. The problem is not just that the rhetoric of the Golden Rule has often been a hypocritical cover under which market expansion together with political and/or cultural colonization has taken place. The problem is also that the way of life we offered or

imposed on others was not, in the long run, of the unambiguously high quality we thought it was. The consumption of natural resources may have seemed great while the party lasted (and bear in mind that “consumption” originally meant “wasting of the body by disease,” and “consumer” originally meant “one who squanders and wastes”), but the ensuing hangover leaves both us Westerners and our Westernized guests full of regrets. The problem is compounded by the fact that we have buried cultural sources in the process of digging for natural resources. And many of the ignored, hastily dismissed, or marginalized cultural sources harbor a rich array of alternative conceptions of nature and its relation to humans. Surely Native Americans, Africans, East Asians, and other non-Western peoples and their traditional cultures have much to teach us regarding how we might fundamentally rethink our relation to the natural world.

The problems we collectively face regarding the natural world must be pondered and addressed on various levels. We need to elect policy makers who will act quickly to establish regulations that will, for example, significantly curb carbon emissions and other pollutants. We also need social scientists and philosophers to critically reflect on how the consumer culture of the global village is shaping our thoughts, forming and fueling our desires so as to maintain the status quo of the corporate-political complex that is driving the bulldozers of environmental destruction.

At the same time as we urgently act and thoughtfully critique, we also need writers, philosophers, researchers, and spiritual practitioners to take a step back, carefully reflect on, and boldly reimagine our most basic ontological, biological, and anthropological concepts. This is where we may have the most to learn from other cultures. As an example, and as one small contribution toward this endeavor, in my talk at Penn State’s Rock Ethics Institute in April of 2016,<sup>1</sup> I suggested that Japanese thought—its traditional Shinto sensibilities and Daoist influenced schools of Buddhism, as well as many of its modern philosophies that have sought to bring these traditional sources into both critical and cooperative dialogue with Western thought—can teach us how to rethink human freedom in a manner that is not at odds with, but rather takes part in, the naturalness of nature.

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<sup>1</sup> The material in that talk was later incorporated into the following publication: Bret W. Davis, “Natural Freedom: Human/Nature Non-Dualism in Zen and Japanese Thought,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, edited by Bret W. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 685–715.